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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the need for a strategic focus on the improvement of the principalship. Whatever technical changes are made in a school district's formal system for selecting, training, appraising, compensating, and certifying principals, there are predictable consequences for the political and cultural dimensions of that district (that is, the decision-making process by the one hiring, and the introduction of new types of principals with different values and skills). It is hoped that statewide efforts and local school district efforts to improve the principal will pay careful attention to all the technical, political, and cultural dimensions involved in any strategic focus on the principalship. (Author/TE)

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STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE PRINCIPALSHIP

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NOVEMBER 1984

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This paper addresses the need for a strategic focus on the improvement of the principalship. Whatever technical changes are made in a school district's formal system for selecting, training, appraising, compensating and certifying, there are predictable consequences for the political and cultural dimensions of that district. It is hoped that state-wide efforts and/or local school district efforts to improve the principal will pay careful attention to all the technical, political, and cultural dimensions involved in any strategic focus on the principalship.

J.H.C.

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STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE PRINCIPALSHIP

STRATEGIC FOCUS

The advantage to a private company of developing a strategic focus is that it can concentrate its resources and, thereby, increase the likelihood of success. A computer company, for example, may narrow its offerings to those areas in which it will not have to compete directly with long established computer producers. Such a focus allows the company to develop a special market niche. Similarly, even though most school districts face the demand that they be all things to all people, a single school district will likely increase its effectiveness if it concentrates its resources in one area. If a district concentrates on improving student performance (the so-called "bottom line" for many school districts),three major strategic foci suggest themselves: (1) increasing parent participation in the work of the school (a strategy of community schools); (2) improving teacher performance (this strategy has received primary attention); and (3) improving the role of the principal.

This paper argues for a focus on the principal because it might be considered a direct influence on student improvement. The research on effective principals has established firm connections between the

quality of the principal and student performance. The number of principals compared to teachers and parents makes their contribution to student learning disproportional. Selection, training, and development are more manageable tasks for the smaller population of principals than for teachers. Developing better principals may even be seen as an indirect approach to the development of teachers because good principals hire, train, and develop good teachers.

FOCUSING ON THE PRINCIPAL

Once a district decides to focus its resources on the strategic development of principals, it becomes necessary that a data base be established to guide such development. Two choices present themselves: building its own data base or using the accumulated knowledge available. In its formative stage, Florida Council on Educational Management (FCEM) decided that it needed to develop a new knowledge base which would focus on the competencies differentiating high-performing principals from their moderate-performing counterparts. It is conceivable that some districts (especially large ones) may wish to replicate such studies in order to ensure that the competencies fit the unique characteristics of the district. However, the Council's competencies are thoroughly validated and can provide an excellent source of data for school districts in other states. Supplementing the Council's findings with other research on high performers (not only in education) will aid in the local district's attainment of readiness.

The research now available is excellent in allowing one to differentiate between those characteristics of high performers and those of moderate performers. The research is not as adequate in helping to differentiate organizational characteristics which support high performance. More research needs to be done in this area. What such studies as the Florida Council in Educational Management (FCEM) (Huff, 1982; Martinko, 1984) and The Urban Principal (1981) show is that high performing principals are able to increase student performance under constructive or supportive organizational conditions. Nevertheless, it is reasonable that if a district adopts a strategy of improving the principalship it will want to examine its organizational arrangements to ensure that it is supporting high performance in its principals.

TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The technical task of developing principals may be defined as improving the district's formal systems for (a) selecting (b) training (c) appraising performance (d) compensating and (e) certifying principals.

The strategic question becomes, "What is the best delivery system for each of the five formal systems?" That is, what social technology exists to ensure that selection, training, and the like will drive principal development toward the high-performing competencies that have been targeted by the district? An earlier paper by Croghan and Lake (1984) in this area has discussed the decisions developed by the FCEM on these matters. For example, the FCEM has developed a unique approach

to selection referred to as "Targeted Selection" originally formulated by Development Dimensions International. Similarly, it has developed technology to increase the likelihood that training, performance appraisals, and the like be directed toward reinforcement of identified competencies. This technology might then be transferred from the Council to the district through state-wide management academies and/or regional management development networks.

POLITICS OF CHANGE

There is a clear need to address the technical requirements necessary when emphasizing a strategic focus on the development of principals. For every technical change in an organization there are concomitant requirements in the political (influence) and cultural dimensions (Ticny, 1983). A technical change, (that is, selection process procedures change) will alter the political influence structure (the decision-making process by the one hiring) and will alter the cultural dimension of the district as new types of principals (with different values and skills) are introduced.

All organizations face the problem of allocating power and resources. The uses to which resources will serve, as well as the selection of those who will reap the benefits of these resources must be determined. Decisions about such issues are reflected in compensation programs, career decisions, budget decisions, and the internal power structure of the organization.

A primary influence or political activity is that of convincing the

local Board of Education to concentrate its resources on the development of the principal. This is even compounded by the requirement that such an effort will probably require three to five years and boards are not known for their long-range planning. Nevertheless, there is a compelling set of data to indicate that this is a wise decision.

Another early influential concern is "Who should direct the effort to improve the principalship in the district?" Certainly there is a strong argument that such an effort should come out of the superintendent's office directly. Who actually directs the effort will, of course, send a message to the principals which determines the importance of this effort as viewed by the district.

One political criterion absolutely essential to the success of focusing on the principal is to determine a means for building group support among the principals themselves. This is one place in which state and national associations of principals can be brought to bear, since they will quite naturally support such a focus if it is well founded and supported by current research.

Any change toward improving the principals in a district will usually be received by principals as an indictment of their past actions. One way of overcoming this problem is to emphasize how the research on high-performing principals represents new data on principal effectiveness conducted on practicing principals similar to themselves and is therefore highly practical and sensible. This approach will surely minimize problems of resistance.

In terms of political influence, the Council has found that principals who are already in the district do not resist new selection programs as much as those who have been responsible for selection in the past. Several superintendents have praised the new selection programs because they say it takes much of the ambiguity and bias out of the selection process. Principals respond favorably to new training programs if their initial experiences in training are informative and they understand the research impelling improvements in the principalship. If initial training experiences require change, more resistance is created.

Surprisingly, even on such a politically sensitive matter as compensation, principals can commit to new programs if they believe these programs to be equitable and just. Before attempting to install a new compensation program the Council committed to a one-year study in a district with observers from fifteen more before the new system was actually installed. When it was, the principals and the Board concurred completely with its installation (Peat, Marwick, Mitchell, 1984).

Still another key to managing the influence process, while maintaining a new focus on the principal, is effective management of the performance appraisal process. Again, there is a large body of knowledge on the dynamics of performance appraisals making it possible to design valid, reliable evaluation processes. However, from a political point of view the important criterion is whether or not the process will pass the belief test by principals as to whether it is credible and fair. Thus, who administers the performance appraisal and how it is processed become as important as the processes of reliability

and validity.

The wise manager of change will carefully consider such political ramifications in mapping a district's path toward principal development.

FITTING THE CULTURE TO THE NEW TASK

A major focus of the corporate world in the last few years has been upon corporate culture (Deal, 1982). There are dozens of books (some, best sellers, such as In Search of Excellence, 1982) and hundreds of journal articles that emphasize the importance of an organization's culture to its total effectiveness . This impact is a natural byproduct of an earlier effort to imitate Japanese management in creating organization cultures totally dedicated to worker development and quality performance.

Similarly, the corporate culture of a school district will ultimately determine whether a new emphasis on improving the principalship will be institutionalized or will become obsolete. Certainly the history of innovation in education attests to the importance of this dimension as study after study has attributed the failure to innovate to the "NIH" (not invented here) syndrome.

Unfortunately, this is also an area in which very little is known. In corporate settings, most organizations renowned for their strong cultures, e.g., Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Proctor and Gamble, all had a dynamic, innovative chief executive in their formative stages. For example, Tom Watson, Sr., personally designed the major personnel systems of IBM. During periods of crisis, new and powerful leaders might emerge who are capable of changing the basic culture as Lee Iaccoca has demonstrated at Chrysler.

Very few examples exist of organizations that have self-consciously changed their culture. The change task however, can be articulated. It can be seen from the above discussion that the technical task of developing the principal-hip proceeds by identifying those competencies associated with high performance and then implementing selection, training, performance appraisals, compensation and certification systems to support these competencies. So it follows that since an organization's culture is the pattern of beliefs and values about the nature of work, the culture-change task is to build beliefs and values which in turn support the positions the district takes on each of the above systems. To accomplish this, it is first necessary to assess current beliefs. Do principals currently believe that selection is just an "old boy system" unrelated to competence? Is training used as a reward by sending "favorites" to "elaborate training sites?" Are performance appraisals believed to actually influence compensation? Or, rather, are they believed to be of no consequence? Is compensation strictly a seniority - driven system without consideration for performance?

It becomes imperative then that the beliefs and values of the organizational system be determined. If the beliefs described above currently exist regarding the core human resource systems, then such beliefs must be altered if new technical changes are to succeed.

Once information about beliefs has been collected through surveys or interviews, then a change effort can be developed. The little that is known about change in other systems suggests that the key executive, the superintendent, must (1) announce the intention to change, (2)

present a vision of what the new culture will be like, (3) develop detailed procedures for changing it, (4) set up reward and recognition systems for those who adopt the new culture, and finally (5) role model the changes. Next, patience is a necessity. Even the best-conceived culture changes take years.

SUMMARY

This paper has responded to a request by the Southeastern Regional Council for Educational Improvement to describe the learnings gained by the Florida Council on Education Management that focused upon strategic change issues for local districts wishing to increase the performance capacity of their principals.

The response to this request has been discussed in terms of a theory of managing strategic change which insists that any technical change implemented in the organizational life of a school district will have consequences for the political (influence) and cultural dimensions of that district. Given this argument, careful attention is given to the full range of technical, political, and cultural dimensions involved in improving the principalship.

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